DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 247 574 CS 208 412

AUTHOR Lifschutz, Ellen St. Sure
TITLE Special Sections of Freshman English--A Pragmatic Approach to Teaching University Students with Poor Writing Skills.
PUB DATE Dec 82
NOTE 22p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Descriptive (141) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS College Freshmen; English Instruction; Higher Education; *High Risk Students; *Program Content; Program Development; *Remedial Programs; Writing (Composition); *Writing Difficulties; *Writing Improvement; Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS University of California Berkeley

ABSTRACT

This report describes the Special Sections of Freshman English for Poorly Prepared Students at the University of California at Berkeley. The development of the program is described, including the rationale behind the course, the diverse student make-up, and some of the teaching techniques used (allowing students to choose topics, peer editing, and having students read at least two book-length works per semester). The paper also describes how teaching assistants are incorporated into the course design and finally reports on how budget cuts ended the program. (CRH)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☒ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

ED247574

SPECIAL SECTIONS OF FRESHMAN ENGLISH-- a pragmatic approach to teaching university students with poor writing skills

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Ellen St. S. Lifschutz

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Ellen St. Sure Lifschutz
2960 Piedmont Avenue
Berkeley,
California 94705

December 1982

CS208412

"I entered this course with a strong dislike of English but I am leaving it with a new-found thrill in the art of writing. . . ."

The problem of students who cannot write adequately well for academic and professional purposes has clearly settled in on American college campuses like an endemic disease, and those who most painfully suffer its effects are the students themselves. From a practical point of view, the immediate issue is not why so many students write so poorly, but what can be done about it, and done in time to help the students already in or about to enter our colleges and universities.

Most particularly, in my view at least, the most pressing necessity is to help those minority students who, despite less than ideal preparatory education, have nevertheless made their way to college only to find that their lack of writing skills virtually dooms them to failure. Recruiters' efforts to achieve affirmative action enrollment goals are not only pointless but literally sadistic if those students once enrolled are not given the kind of help they need to survive and thrive in college.

For the past two years a group of instructors at the University of California, Berkeley, have devoted their talents and energies to working in special sections of Freshman English with self-selected students whose prior records and self-evaluations suggest that they may be likely candidates for failure. Although we are well aware that there are no panaceas in education and that all successes are partial and relative, our overall results could certainly be charac-

terized as solidly satisfactory, even heartening. This is surely news worth broadcasting--especially given the fact that our teaching approach is not yet another new methodology but simply a useful combination of common property ideas, tested, revised and refined as they have proved useful or otherwise in practice. Furthermore, the project or program which has evolved from this experiment might be adapted to almost any academic situation in which students' lack of verbal skills is a serious impediment to their progress.

Since U.C. Berkeley's Special Sections project evolved, over two years, as a series of responses to continuous challenges and problems, large and small, it might best be described sequentially, with an account of some of the things that worked as well as those that didn't.

The experiment had its genesis in the Fall of 1980 when the author, then a teaching associate in the English Department, agreed to a suggestion from the University's Student Learning (i.e. Tutoring) Center that the department offer a section of Freshman English with an obligatory tutored workshop to accommodate students with poor skills who would probably otherwise come to the Center for individual tutoring.

I had already been assigned to teach a half-section of English 1A (sixteen students with one instructor rather than the more usual thirty-two with an instructor and a teaching assistant) and the smaller class seemed appropriate for this experiment. I was not at all certain, however, that even

sixteen students would be willing to enroll in a course which required their attendance at two-hour weekly workshops in addition to two two-hour class meetings, but in fact nearly seventy signed up on pre-enrollment day for that first experimental class.

Interviewing and getting a special application form from each one, I realized that a sizeable number of the students had noticeable problems with English. Since I knew from past experience that native and non-native speakers have quite different sorts of reading and writing difficulties, I eliminated those who seemed to have serious English language deficiencies but was still left with about fifty applicants. (It should be noted that many of the remaining pool of more or less "native" speakers were bilingual, some of them from families who spoke no English at all at home.) I then decided that, since I had announced the section as a class for students with poor writing records who were worried about passing English 1A, I should give highest priority to those with the worst records, picking my class list from the bottom up as it were.

I also decided that, although I wanted a group as homogeneous as possible with regard to their writing problems, I wanted it to be as diverse as possible otherwise. My first class, as it finally took shape, was made up of eight males and eight female students, including one black girl, four Hispanic or Chicano students, three of Filippino and two of Asian ancestry, one of Persian parentage and five who might be described as mainstream white American.

I was, and remain, particularly interested in helping minority students acquire the writing skills they need to succeed at the university, but it did not seem to me wise to think of this class as a special service course exclusively for minority or otherwise disadvantaged students. I did not want to jeopardize the experiment by opening myself to a charge of reverse discrimination--and I was well aware that minority students were not the only ones with serious writing problems. Consequently, I ended up with about sixty per cent minority students (Hispanic, Filippino and Afro-American, with many more black students signing up for later sections) and the rest Asian-ancestry or Caucasian. It was a healthy mélange, reasonably representative of our western citizenry, and an interesting group to work with.

The apparently random but in fact rather carefully contrived mix of students came to be characteristic of later Special Section classes as well. I so much liked the unity-within-diversity of my Fall 1980 class that I encouraged later Special Section instructors to attempt to get similar mixtures.

My attitude towards this first group--and all subsequent groups--was that they were all perfectly capable of high level academic achievement, but that they labored under a particular handicap which I could probably help them overcome if they would work very hard with me. However artificial or naively idealistic this may sound, it is, in fact, the way I viewed these Berkeley students, and it worked. The dynamics of such an approach is similar, I think, to the phen-

omenon reported several years ago when elementary school teachers were given deliberately falsified lists of students who had scored highest on IQ tests. The students subsequently made spectacular progress in school, the result, apparently, of the teachers' high expectations of them and the encouragement they got to fulfill those expectations.

We have, it is true, had three or four Special Sections students in the past two years who seemed out of place at Berkeley, not in fact capable of doing university-level work, but these were rare exceptions. And even in these few cases I was not sure why they couldn't do it--perhaps the whole Berkeley experience was just too alien, the pressures and demands too different from what they were used to, and their minds simply balked.

I have had a few others, mostly athletes, who simply would not or could not give sufficient time and effort to their academic work, but otherwise, my belief in my students' abilities has generally proved very well placed. My sense of students' positive responses to my belief in their intellectual potential has often been suggested in individual student's evaluations:

> This class is more than just a class. It has been a personal experience from which I have gained confidence in my writing skills and in myself. . . .
>
> Her inspiration motivated me to do my best not only in her class, but also in my other two classes. She made me want to struggle (and her work definitely was a struggle for me). . . .

A formal study of my Fall 1981 Special Section of English 1B by Berkeley's Teaching Innovation and Evaluation

Services offered more objective substantiation. Asked to rate me from 1 (Not at all descriptive) to 5(Very descriptive) in various areas, fifteen students out of fifteen gave me the highest possible score for motivating them to do their best work.

It will be useful here to explain exactly what the work is, in Special Sections of English 1A and 1B at U.C. Berkeley, because the content of these courses is, I am convinced, an important element in their success.

I should first mention that one of the very first decisions I made about my Fall 1980 "workshop" 1A was that I would not alter the reading list I had already compiled for the regular section I had expected to teach. It seemed to me, when I thought about this experimental class, that I had an obligation to the English Department, the University and the students themselves to find ways to bring the students up to the required level of reading, writing and critical thinking, rather than lower the level to accommodate the students. I did eventually decide to shorten the reading list somewhat, but I did not make it any easier.

It seemed to me much more important to emphasize quality than quantity with these (and probably all) students, much more useful to get them profoundly involved in critical readings of a few works than hurried and superficial readings of many. And English 1A and 1B at Berkeley are reading and composition courses, not solely or primarily composition. The combination is, in my opinion, essential to a real

development of student skills. The reading and discussion of subtle, complex and important writing (expository works in 1A, imaginative literature in 1B) helps the students develop their own critical opinions which become the material they must then struggle to articulate and defend in their essays for the course. I have come to dread the idea of ever again having to teach a composition course which hangs by a tenuous thread from a few perfunctory readings. To write well, I am convinced, one should have something of some importance to say, and that something should, in a college-level course, be related to one's efforts to understand some subject beyond one's normal grasp and ordinary experience. The entire experience should be an intellectual exertion, both to understand and to express one's understanding. Asking composition students to find their own topics, express their opinions on subjects they know and care little about, write about their own experiences is not, in my opinion, the kind of intellectual challenge college students need. They need to be directed toward difficult materials and required to digest, assess, develop and organize them in a variety of ways in writing.

U.C. Berkeley's English 1A and 1B program admirably allows for this kind of teaching with its reading requirement in 1A of two book-length works in addition to essays and in 1B of at least five different works, including a Shakespeare play, coupled with a writing requirement of expository essays totalling at least 6500 words for each course.

The kind of writing instruction I espouse could, however, be equally well taught in any course with a solid and demanding reading and/or research component, and at any level. The point is that the more complex and sophisticated your ideas, the more you must struggle to communicate them clearly and persuasively, and the more interesting and rewarding the struggle. How can an account of what you did last summer or your opinion of military conscription help you to know, when the day comes that you need to know, how to write a senior thesis, a grant proposal, a research report or a legal brief? Mind-stretching content-based essay writing in virtually any field, together with instruction and experience in editing, constitute, I believe, the best general method of improving one's writing and developing skills easily adaptable to any writing task. This is what I have tried to achieve in the Special Sections.

The importance of teaching editing skills in writing classes seems to me to be too obvious to need arguing, but since I know that it is not in fact universally recognized I will say that I have found it so useful for my Special Sections students that I spend at least one third of our classroom time working together on smaller or larger pieces of their own writings to show them how, in effect, to learn to read their own and each others' papers the way I do: critically but constructively. Not just what is not good, but why, and how to make it better.

I have found that students respond much more attentively to examples of poor or flawed writing from their own recent papers than to examples, however apt and amusing, from writing manuals. So I cull useful examples--sentences, paragraphs--from their latest papers, as I am reading them, and duplicate them (without authorial attribution) for discussion during the next class meeting. Toward the end of the quarter, when the students have acquired some rudimentary--or not so rudimentary--editing skills, I might give them an entire (anonymous) student essay to critique, usually a rather good one but with some particular weaknesses, which they invariably manage to identify after some discussion. There is no question in my mind that students who can see the weaknesses in their colleagues' work will begin to be able to identify their own (just as I am a better critic of my own writing because of my work with student papers), but they must be trained and encouraged to do it themselves, to identify and improve weak writing on their own (not just read about it in a handbook or respond to a teacher's comments).

Up to this point I have described relatively successful or useful elements in the evolution of the Special Sections, but not all of our experiments have worked equally well. All of the experimental classes during the first year (1980-81) included an obligatory tutored workshop, but difficulties developed with this format before the end of the first quarter.

Despite several talks with the tutor about my teaching aims and many discussions with the class about the impor-

tance of learning to develop, articulate and defend their own ideas, I began to realize that I could easily determine which students were in which tutoring groups by the sameness of the ideas in their papers. I had understood that the tutor would be working on editing skills and particular grammar problems with his groups, but it became clear to me that in fact they must be discussing paper topics in the workshops, and in such a way that most of the students produced what I came to describe as homogenized papers: the same general interpretation or thesis, with a few aberrant alternatives tucked in incongruously here or there, a consensus, apparently, of the prevailing opinions, or the dominant voices, of each workshop group, with the minority voices, or sometimes the author's own timid thoughts, tacked on for good measure. I eventually determined that what had at first seemed like a simple misunderstanding of aims between me and the tutor was, in fact, a serious philosophical or pedagogical difference of opinion.

I was determined to teach my students to stand on their own intellectual feet, to work independently, to trust their own perceptions, to prod their own intelligence, to speak up for and learn to defend their own ideas. It was apparent to me that an important component of these students' writing problems was a lack of confidence in themselves as scholars, a kind of intellectual passivity, an overwillingness to accept the ideas of others uncritically. Whatever the tutor was doing (and he evidently believed in his aims and methods as fervently as I believed in my own), he was not getting the kind of results I wanted. Worse, he seemed

to be undermining my "weaning" efforts. While I was trying to teach them skills which would help them to become intellectually independent scholars, he was encouraging them, in fact if not by intention, to become dependent on the workshop group--on some kind of peer consensus--and on himself.

The workshop idea had seemed sound enough on the face of it, but I ultimately decided, after a second quarter of cross-purposes and misunderstandings, that I wanted to try a class without the tutoring. Three other instructors had, by then, joined the teaching experiment and one who had had problems similar to mine also wanted to dispense with the tutoring. Consequently, in the second year we renamed our classes Special Sections and offered the option of tutored workshops to any instructor who wanted to use them. Most chose not to, and the results, as far as I can determine from student evaluations and instructors' reactions, have been at least as good as the "workshop" classes.

Our only worry, in dropping the workshops, was whether, without them, we would get less motivated students: the extra two hour a week obligation had virtually eliminated students who were not ready to work hard. One of my fellow instructors decided to discourage sluggards by holding her classes at 8 AM. I, on the other hand, decided that I did not really want to eliminate those who might be looking for an easy ride: I wanted to cajole them into my classroom and then get them to work. One student testified to the success of my entrapment technique in an end of the quarter critique:

> I am a sophomore who likes to do a minimal amount of writing in any English course. Being the lazy oaf that I am, I knew that these special courses were meant for me: minimal work and fantastic grades. I'm still looking for a special English 1B course with those characteristics.
>
> During the first class meeting, Mrs. Lifschutz was very frank with us all; she did not hesitate to inform us that we were expected to work long, hard hours on her assignments. Everything she said was enough to discourage anyone with my attitude; I stayed because it was too late to get into another section. Well, she wasn't joking. She worked us beyond belief; however I have nothing to complain about: my writing improved tremendously.

Many of my students over the past two years have mentioned in their course evaluations the hard work they have put in on my assignments, but I can recall only one who expressed this as a criticism. More typical comments had an unmistakeably positive tone:

> I probably struggled more with this course than any I have taken. . . .
>
> I stayed up nights (without regret) working on the papers and trying my hardest. . . .

With each quarter of teaching Special Sections, I have become less and less concerned about losing my students' good will by pushing them too hard. Quite the contrary, in fact. The more demanding my assignments, I have found, the better in general the results.

I have also found that tough standards in other respects similarly bring nothing but good results. I insist, for instance, that all papers be typed, and any paper not handed in at the beginning of class on the day it is due is penalized a full grade. Any late paper not presented at the beginning of the next class period is an automatic F. As a consequence, the papers I get are legible and are nearly always in on time.

For the second year of the special sections project, I received a grant from the University's Council on Educational Development to administer and develop further our experimental classes and to research the impact, if any, of the first year's classes. Primarily, the grant gave the project, temporarily, a kind of legitimacy and, incidentally, an official title: Special Sections of Freshman English for Poorly Prepared Students. It also gave me the opportunity to experiment, in the Winter 1982 quarter, with the idea of teaching a full section with thirty-two students and the help of a teaching assistant who might then, theoretically, go on to teach Special Sections of his own, training others in the process. Again, a reasonable idea on the face of it, but, like the tutoring groups, it didn't work out very well.

The teaching assistant, in Freshman English classes at Berkeley, is required, among other things, to read two-thirds of the papers. Since I wanted to keep in touch with all the students, we shifted the list with each paper so that I read the work of a different group each week, or one in three of each student's papers. I quickly came to miss the continuous flow of written communications between students and instructor, and realized that the one-to-one dialogue had been a vital element in the success of my earlier classes. Teaching alone with a smaller number of students, I had soon learned to recognize the distinctive writing voice of each one, and the characteristic strengths and weaknesses of their papers, so that I could talk, through

my comments, with a particular writing person rather than with an essentially anonymous student.

I had also developed a critical voice of my own designed to stimulate students to further efforts rather than frustrate, anger and paralyze them--and I could not very effectively practice this kind of pushy persuasion when I was commenting only on every third paper. I knew that my critiquing style worked because students had often said so:

> Ellen's comments on my papers were encouraging as well as critical; thus I did not feel defeated when I received a low graded paper. . . .
>
> I think that acknowledging the positive points about a student's work is important in that it doesn't make a student feel like a total disaster. . . .
>
> The comments on papers were helpful because she suggested how I could improve instead of telling me to write a certain way. . . .
>
> Then she began helping me with the comments on my papers. Most of all, when she noted the good points, it made me feel like I could really do it. . . .

I of course intended to help my TA develop a similar style of his own--one which combined tough, meaningful criticism with sincere, personalized encouragement--but, bright and apparently sensitive as he was, he was not able to do it. His paper comments continued to be overwhelmingly negative, and expressed in such a way that they came across as impatient and disdainful. Even visually, his small assertive handwriting, written with dark ink and a heavy nibbed pen, looked aggressive. I suggested he use pencil, both for the lighter visual effect and because even a critic (especially a critic) should sometimes have second thoughts, but he did not succeed in mastering the art of effective critiquing, according to my lights at least. In short, I

decided that full sections with teaching assistant were not the ideal groupings for our experiments in intensive teaching.

By Spring of the second year (1981-82), the Special Sections had assumed certain more or less standard characteristics: half-section classes of sixteen students, hand-chosen from an ever-growing pool of applicants on the basis of need and willingness to work, taught by instructors particularly interested in the teaching challenge. The Special Sections were essentially the same, in terms of work load, content and grading standards, as regular English 1A's and 1B's, so that students could expect to work very hard indeed. But they could also expect certain advantages from the relative homogeneity of the classes in terms of reading and writing skills and the instructors' particular interest in them and their problems.

Beyond this, I made a point, during my administration of the program, of not being overly directive. I had myself been so stimulated by analyzing the problems I encountered and devising strategies to cope with them, that it seemed to me most good teachers would want the same freedom to experiment with their own techniques. Further, most of those who volunteered were experienced teachers and would not have been interested in taking part in a heavily programmed project. We had many interesting discussions in informal meetings and planned to develop a handbook for future instructors (none of us were tenured members of the English department and

we knew that our days were numbered), to include descriptions of various ploys and techniques we had found worthwhile, a few of which I have alluded to in this paper.

It was apparent that the Special Sections were serving a real need with some demonstrable success, but it was also clear that the ever increasing number of students applying for admission to these classes could not be accommodated unless funds were available to hire experienced post-doctoral instructors: the project could not long thrive depending almost entirely for its teaching staff on graduate student associates who were simultaneously working on their dissertations. One-time funds were procured from the University to hire two extra instructors for the Winter 1982 quarter and four for the Spring, for a total, in the second year, of ten instructors (including four graduate associates) who taught a total of twelve half sections and one full section, bringing our overall two year student enrollment to 352.

At that point, the project foundered. A request to the Council on Educational Development for an additional year's administrative and research funding was turned down with the explanation that "we intend to use our limited funds for new initiatives, with the thought that successful projects such as yours will be supported through departmental instructional or other funds. . . ." The Council hoped that I would be able to "obtain a stable source of support from other sources . . . for this important project" but did not know where such funds might, in fact, be found. The English

Department's Freshman English budget for 1982-83 was in fact cut well below the previous year's level.

None of the Special Sections lecturers was rehired and the project now (Fall 1982) consists of two teaching associates--one from last year and one new volunteer--teaching two Special Sections of English 1A, with the promise of another of last year's associates teaching a section in the winter quarter. There is no longer any program or project, there will be no handbook, and there will probably be no Special Sections at all after this year.

Nevertheless, it may be worth summarizing the evidence on the basis of which the Special Sections project may be pronounced a success. Comments, both signed and anonymous, from the Special Sections "graduates" have been overwhelmingly positive, and nearly all the English Department instructors who have taught them, usually with some initial reservations about taking on an entire class of students with poor writing records, have volunteered to teach others. As one instructor wrote to me at the end of her first quarter with the project, "I found this particular class the most rewarding I have ever had. Apart from the few who fell by the wayside, all the students made great strides--I have never met such a hard-working bunch."

The more objective data that I culled from University records showed that our students got approximately the same range of grades as students in regular Freshman English sections--but grades are slippery counters and nearly impossible to standardize in literature and composition

courses. Perhaps we were not entirely objective in our grading. Or perhaps the students would have done just as well without us, in regular sections.

In my search for more solid comparative figures, I discovered something with a different sort of significance. I found that the minority students in our Special Sections enrolled in and completed the required freshman reading and composition courses at U.C. Berkeley in strikingly greater numbers and more quickly than did control group students with similarly poor records in composition courses. Seventy-three per cent of the Affirmative Action and Educational Opportunity Program students in our Fall 1980 and Winter 1981 Special Sections of English 1A (19 out of 26) had successfully completed English 1B by the end of the Spring 1981 quarter. By contrast, only twenty-six per cent of the control group students (9 out of 31) had completed these required freshman courses by the same date. Although the numbers here are small, they point to a serious problem of some magnitude.

Freshmen are, of course, supposed to enroll promptly in required composition courses, but I discovered through further research that sizeable numbers of U.C. students--and generally those with the weakest skills who need the courses most--find ways to postpone and even evade them. A number of comments in my students' course evaluations indicate that they had been essentially traumatized by previous writing courses, almost paralyzed by fear of exposing their weaknesses to reprimand and ridicule, and such feelings are undoubtedly common among the control

group students as well.

One must therefore reach the ironic conclusion that students with poor writing skills are often fearfully reluctant to take the very courses they most need. On the other hand, my research makes clear that the enticement of Special Sections of Freshman English designed especially for them goes a long way toward overcoming their reluctance. The crucial importance of this seemingly modest accomplishment is obvious: you can't teach students to write if you can't get them into your classrooms.

Our experiences over the past two years suggest that once you do get them in, you can keep them and teach them most effectively not by forcing them through pedestrian writing assignments, but by genuinely, relentlessly--and respectfully--challenging their intelligence. If you combine instruction in composition with serious reading and/or research (in any field) and insist that the students formulate and present their own critical opinions about the study material in their writing for the course, you will be enriching and educating them in many ways at once. If this sounds more like an honors course format than a formula for helping poorly prepared students improve their writing, so be it. We have demonstrated with more than 300 students that it works.

A student might appropriately be the last to put in his own good word for this experimental project that survived only long enough to prove its own worth:

The subjects we wrote on were hard and challenging. The brain power I had to put behind some of my papers was intense. At the time of writing these papers, I complained alot. I was really grateful at the end, though, for I was finally learning how to write. . . .

It was an intense course, but the class was also fun which, I think, is the most important thing.